

Chapter 5: From Grass to Plastic

Introduction

This chapter discusses and interprets the different stages of development of the new composite mat. A variety of mats has been collected systematically over an extended period from 1995 to 2004, and basic information was documented in relation to the background of the mat: the name of the mat maker, the area made, the date bought, the price, the grass type(s) used, any additional material used and the function of the mat. The profile for each mat was catalogued and entered into a spreadsheet (see General Group Appendix pages A, A1-A34); all photographs are referred to as 'Figures' (01-209) and may be found on (pages 93-100). The following additional information was taken into consideration: size, type of string used, number of vertical threads, type of edging used, whether made on the *Imbongolo*, level of technical excellence, a description including distinguishing features and information concerning location of purchase and finally, when available, the background of the mat maker. The collection has been divided into three main groups, 'General Group,' 'Msithini Group,' and 'Mngometulu Group.' Within the General Group there exists a modest but significant number of mats that are worthy of attention as the 'highveld style' sub-group. This section is followed by the last two divisions: the Msithini Group (Chapter six) and the Mngometulu Group (Chapter seven).

Gell (1992) discusses "art as a component of technology," a link that is justified because art is "the outcome of technical process, the sorts of technical process in which artists are skilled." He queries, "is it beautifully made or made beautiful?" His discussion allows us to place the current production of grass mats within the scope of "excellent products of techniques." Furthermore, his comments on the Melanesian *Trobriand* carver are most instructive here:

The carver follows an ideal template and does not produce a new type of canoe-board but a new token of an existing type; so he is not seeking to be original, but on the other hand, he does not approach the task of carving as merely a challenge to his skill with the materials, seeing it, instead, primarily as a challenge to his mental powers.¹

The transformation of mat-making from grass to plastic can be attributed to several factors, but the development of the socio-economic environment has been the primary incentive. For a considerable number of Swazi mat-makers the late 1990's and the early 2000 have provided a situation whereby their creative and financial security was realised. Economic developments in Swaziland contributed to providing the impetus for innovative experimentation with the traditional skill of grass mat-making and the introduction of new materials such as sweet wrappers and plastic has stimulated the transformation of grass mats into composite mats. In the process, the traditional role of the grass mat has diverged from domestic use to become an article of considerable commercial value.

Several factors have influenced the recent 'decoration' of mats. In this study, an attempt has been made to establish personal reasons through interviews with mat-makers and from other sources. A starting point for an interpretation of the reasons why mats have become decorated may be sought in a comparison with the decoration of beer pots. Considerable research has taken place in recent years around Ethnoarchaeological work on African pottery, trying to identify and interpret why pots are decorated. Hall (1998), in his study of Late Iron Age Pottery, suggests that a likely rationale might be that the higher the level of exposure a pot receives, the higher the likelihood of it being decorated; additionally, pots used in spaces where men and women interact tend to be decorated, while vessels that are used in private contexts are not.

¹ Gell, A, 1992:43

Swazi beer pots are an established component of Swazi material culture. The making of Marula beer, a seasonal activity dependent on the availability of the marula fruit and the payment in beer to the *Amabutfo* and the *Lutsango*² for harvesting the King's fields, also falls into the category of seasonal activities Bonner (1981) and Crush (1992) documented.

Among the Swazi, there are two types of beer pots: large ones for brewing beer, *Imbito* and smaller ones used as beer drinking vessels, *Ludziwo* (*s*) *Tinziwo* (*p*). These pots fall into the 'low-visibility' and 'high-visibility' classes suggested by Hall. *Imbito* are so large they are buried in the ground in order to keep them steady and to control the temperature during the fermentation process. Thus the *Imbito* are never decorated. The smaller pot, *Ludziwo*, is used for communal beer drinking and displays elaborate patterning. Of interest here are the similarities that exist between the reasons for the decoration of the beer pots and the decoration of the sitting mats and the new composite wall hangings. The sitting mats and wall hangings fall into the 'high visibility' category.

A majority of the mats in the General Group were collected within the radius of Manzini. This research bias is largely due to the Manzini market acting as a conduit for the development and marketing of grass mats, including the composite mats. The Manzini market has also provided the opportunity for different mat makers to inspire and influence each other, and to collaborate and explore the possibilities of new application of plastic materials, and the acquisition of additional materials. Furthermore, the Cadburys Sweet Factory in Matsapha (also in the Manzini area) has been the main source for many mat-makers to obtain the popular sweet paper.

In collecting and then classifying the mats, I have considered the variety of materials, as well as technical and formal factors that have transformed the surface appearance of the traditional grass mat. Parallel to recording the important changes from grass to

² *Amabutfo* is the King's male regiment and *Lutsango* is the King's female regiment.

plastic, the traditional sleeping and sitting mats and, in addition, the *Sitsebe*, were collected on a regular basis. There is substantial evidence to demonstrate that the technology employed in making both the traditional undecorated and the recent decorated mats has remained constant during the last ten years³ (see Chapter two). Furthermore, the discussion of the transition from grass to plastic will take into consideration and draw attention to diverse stylistic variations demonstrated by the 'highveld style' of mat making.

During the last nine years the new composite mat has been the focus of several stages of development: it has become smaller, an item used as a wall hanging, and more colourful and shiny due to the integration of sweet paper. During the early stages, the mat was constructed using a single colour of sweet paper followed by geometric patterning, particularly the popular rhombus motif. The introduction of words and phrases incorporated into the design radically changed the role of the wall hanging; it became an item for displaying religious, personal and sports messages.

As discussed in the section on the anatomy of the mats (see Chapter four), the traditional sleeping mat is unadorned. The high-visibility verses low-visibility aspect of each type of mat determines its surface quality and appearance, whether it is embellished or unadorned. The surface appearance of the 'plastic' version of the mats is attributed to a number of reasons that over the years have contributed to this change. The gradual introduction of other materials may be traced back to the mid-nineties. During 1995, there was a shortage of grass because of drought conditions, caused by times of low rainfall in Swaziland; only an inferior quality of grass was available, coupled with an acute shortage of dyes. Mat-makers have always been dependent on the seasonally available grasses (grass cutting usually takes place at the beginning of the winter;) as a result many mat makers stockpile raw materials for

³ The use of the *Imbongolo* mat making frame has been established to a pre-1984 date but is probably much older.

future use, (see Chapter two).⁴ A large number of mat-makers in Swaziland during the period of drought either began to utilise their existing stock of grasses to make sleeping mats (these require top quality raw materials free of any natural flaws) or used the inferior quality grass to make smaller mats. These were constructed of plastic sweet-paper-covered grass to hide the flaws.

From conversations with the mat makers, it emerged that whilst they felt there was a need to maintain traditional values in craft, there was also a need for a certain amount of innovation in the production of these mats to make them more marketable. During this period, the reduced presence of the non-plastic covered mat was noticeable. This developing market acted as a measure of the success of the innovation. Success stimulated experimentation with various colourful plastic sweet papers. The result was that both rural and urban craftswomen were involved in making articles for sale, of a type which they did not use themselves. A new pride of finish and competition with other craftswomen also proved to be a motivating factor for producing these mats for the commercial market.

New designs making use of an increasing number of colours and patterns were created every week and sold alongside the older form of grass mats. Levinsohn: (1984), in discussing the production of Botswana baskets, observed that ‘African craft that began with functional intent has become an artistic medium that is increasingly motivated by aesthetics.’ This is similarly borne out by the production of the composite mats. The difference is that the Botswana basket projects are run by NGOs and the Swazi grass mat-making is not. Thus, the aesthetics at work in the Swazi case are not influenced by development agencies and in that sense may be perceived to be original.

⁴ Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30th Oct 1999)
Sarafina Dlamini (laNlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30th Oct.1999)
Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6th April 1999)

Swazi mat-makers have shown ingenuity when it comes to decorating the grass mats. The following descriptions of mat decoration are considered chronological, not on a date-based sequence, but on a sequential and gradual manipulation of raw materials during the different stages of development defined below. The earliest form of patterning is assumed to have been created using grass on grass (see Chapter four). In the process of binding grass strands, the regular placement of vertical threads creates a striped effect, in itself constituting an initial form of organised patterning.

On the sitting mats, the following variations were recorded: short vertical criss-crossed dashes (Fig. 130) with the same method used to create horizontal bands (Fig. 131). The above technique required careful crossing of strands of *Inchoboza* in a predetermined area. The next variation involved plaiting strands of *Inchoboza* into lengths equalling the width of the mat in question and placing them horizontally, thus establishing a subtle form of striped patterning (Fig. 144 and Fig. 178). Fig. 006 shows how ‘two-toned’ *Inchoboza* was used to create striped edges combined with red string for the vertical lines in order to add colour (Fig. 006a). Fig. 123 is similar but with more controlled and regular placing of the dark portions of the *Inchoboza*.

For many years, vegetable and subsequently chemical dyes were used to add coloured areas to the sitting mats but a limited form of organised patterning was possible. The procedure of dyeing the grass was lengthy; it involved boiling the grass for hours, and utilising valuable fuel supplies in the process. ‘Gone Rural’ is a commercial outlet that sells dyed grass products, and has refined the technology of dyeing grass through low cost fuel saving applications.⁵ They are responsible for commissioning a whole community of mat-makers in Emoti, in the Middleveld of Swaziland, to make small placemats from sweet wrappers and dyed *Lutindzi*. Figs 058 and 098 are decorated

⁵ (See Chapter two) The wood fuel saving technology for domestic cooking was adapted for a commercial application: dyeing *Lutindzi* for making baskets for ‘Gone Rural.’ *Lutindzi* is slightly waxy and does not dye easily. It normally needs boiling for 45 minutes; 165 litre tanks are needed to handle large amounts of *Lutindzi*, heated from below by a *Basintuthu*-style wood-burning grate. The new grass boiler uses less wood, and the tanks hold more *Lutindzi*. (REASWA 2004: 26-27)

using dyed grass; although they do not pre-date the composite mats, they are considered valid examples of items made from dyed grass and employ a long-term practice that has continued to the present day.⁶ Some mat makers cannot afford the dyes; a recent article in the local press drew attention to a woman (probably a mat-maker) who had stolen dyes from a local Shoprite store.⁷

Only a limited number of samples collected in the Manzini area show the integration of coloured threads or the use of threads in creating surface decorations. Fig. 035 is one of the first examples collected for this study that depicted an elaborate central panel. The mat maker has manipulated white nylon string from one incision on the *Imbongolo* to the next, and created a series of tessellating shapes. In Fig. 056, a combination of white nylon string has been applied for the central part and dyed grass to make horizontal stripes. Fig. 145 depicts a sample collected in northern Swaziland that shows the initial stages of a technique where up to three colours were used simultaneously crossing over at regular intervals to achieve patterned bands. Miriam Msithini in the *KaNgwane* area has perfected this method of manipulating coloured threads to create one-dimensional patterns. For this study, 53 samples were collected that form the 'Msithini Group' applying this particular technique, and it was established that this type of patterning is specific to the *KaNgwane* area (see Chapter six).

The middle 1990's also saw the utilisation of plastic litter; Elizabeth Vilakati explained she was forced to use plastic bags in 1996.⁸ Vilakati, an experienced mat-maker was able to continue making mats but only by using plastic litter when the grasses were in short supply. Figs. 007 and 008 show how easily twisted strips of

⁶Small packets of dyes continue to be sold on the Manzini Market. Pers. Observation between 2000-2004)

⁷ 'Dye sends her to jail: Manzini a 47-year-old woman has been sentenced to six months imprisonment for stealing four packets of blue dye at Shoprite Supermarket. Mavis Dlamini who claimed to have bought the items at the Mbabane branch store failed to convince the court, as it was clear that she had stolen the items'. (*Times of Swaziland*, Wed, 12th March 2003)

⁸ Elizabeth Vilakati, Mbabane Market, pers comm., May 1996

plastic replaced grass in these two examples. Furthermore, Vilakati's plastic mats form a limited number of samples that may be classified as 'recycling.'⁹

Concurrent developments taking place saw many mat-makers introduce a gradual integration of sweet paper with grass, primarily using the 'waste' generated by the Cadburys sweet factory. The sweet factory began operation in 1989 in the main industrial area of Matsapha in the Middleveld of Swaziland. Enterprising women, who were either experienced grass mat-makers or traders, collected this 'waste'. John Hennessy, the public relations manager at the Cadburys sweet factory explained that the sweet paper is printed in Durban and East London, costing R80 a kilogram.¹⁰ This raw material is bought by Cadburys to wrap the sweets. He further claimed that there was a stealing racket in operation amongst his female employees who, incidentally, made up 85% of the workforce. The women were throwing half used reels onto the waste skips or damaging them deliberately and discarding them into the skips; they were collected later and sold to other women or to mat-makers. From his point of view, this had been very problematic and had meant the loss of a considerable amount of raw material. Cadburys had instituted a policy to burn the waste, but also accepted that the so-called waste was being used creatively and had made a decision to donate some of the 'waste' to organisations such as the SOS children's village in Mbabane, where some of the housemothers who were mat-makers could benefit financially from the sale of the items made from this 'waste'.

A subsequent interview with the General Manager of Cadburys, Greg Stocks, in 2004 revealed he was not aware of any theft but hypothesised that the sweet paper was possibly being rescued from the skips on the way to the industrial dump.¹¹ Stocks was aware of the mats being made from the Cadburys sweet paper and felt it was

⁹ This latter use of the sweet paper is not real 'recycling' as it is factory produced and has not been 'used'

¹⁰ John Hennessy, Public Relations Manager, Cadburys Matsapha, SD, (telephone interview, 20th April 1999.)

¹¹ Greg Stocks, GM Cadburys 2004, (pers comm., 24th Aug. 2004)

admirable that Swazi women were making such innovative items. He also confirmed there was no accountable loss being made by the factory and he did not want to make a decision to sell the sweet paper to the mat-makers. He felt that putting a market value on the sweet paper would create an uncontrollable illegal trade. Cadburys currently donate a quantity of the genuine waste in the form of reel-ends to the Lighthouse Project, thereby attempting to control the outlet.¹²

The Cadburys factory produces an assortment of sweets and bubble gums, and uses a variety of wrappers in many different combinations of colours; the plastic comes in a ribbon form on approximately five centimetres wide or one metre wide rolls. Mats collected during 1996 demonstrate the use of the metre wide sheet of sweet paper wrapped around a strand of *Inchoboza*. Each strand of *Inchoboza*, on average, measures 20 mm in circumference; to emulate this, several strands of *Umtsala* can be used to create a rod-like form duplicating the roundness of a single strand of *Inchoboza*.¹³ The early integration of sweet paper demonstrated a wrapping technique: if the metre wide sheet of chocolate éclair sweet paper was used, the silver writing could be organised to form chevrons along the mat surface (this method used up more sweet paper). The wall hangings that emerged during this period were small with the outside surface completely covered in a single type of sweet paper (Figs. 002, 003, 004 and 005), thus establishing the initial integration of sweet paper. There was an absence of patterning at this stage, possibly the main aim being to conceal the inferior grass type used for the foundation. Subsequently, towards the end of 1997, *Umtsala* became the preferred grass type to be covered with the sweet paper or other plastic.

A radical shift began to occur towards the end of 1996 and during the early part of 1997. As demonstrated by Figs. 012, 017, 018, 019 and 020, the patterning became more organised: mats with chevrons, horizontal and vertical stripes, chequer-board

¹² Lighthouse is a street children's project run by Kevin Ward in Mbabane. (Pers comm., Greg Stocks, GM Cadburys 24th Aug. 2004).

¹³ Onoyi Mngometulu (pers comm., April 1999)

bands and blocks of colour appeared for sale. It was a period when there was a liberal availability of sweet paper; this was noticeable in the way the sweet paper was used, determining the type of patterns that emerged (Figs. 026, 026a, 026R, and 026Ra.) The emergence of organised patterns was largely due to the grass being wrapped using the full width of the chocolate éclair sheet of paper. The lettering on the wrappers was arranged in such a way that it decorated the mat both across and over the length and shimmering purple, gold, and silver became a regular feature of the composite wall hangings.

During 1998, the presence of the new mats dominated the market place; however, the patterning began to change. Gradually, the patterns were no longer distinguishable and became more random. It was an indication that the sweet paper was no longer plentiful, perhaps as a result of Cadburys tightening up its security.¹⁴ Mat-makers began to work with a limited supply of sweet paper; the ribbon was cut into thin strips and spiralled around grass strands to create horizontal stripes using a combination of matt and shiny surfaces (Figs. 028, Fig. 029, Fig. 030, Fig. 033, Fig. 046, Fig. 047, Fig. 048, Fig. 049, Fig. 053 and Fig. 054). The size of the mats became smaller, and resulted in the composite wall hanging ‘flooding’ the market, including the roadside craft stalls; the presence of Swazi middle-women and traders from Johannesburg became increasingly obvious.¹⁵

Parallel to this development, it was interesting to note the continued availability of the traditional grass sleeping and sitting mats; the new composite mats had not replaced the traditional ones. The mat-makers continued to experiment using a mixture of additive materials and combining these with different grass types; *Inchoboza* was only used in the early stages of making composite mats. *Umtsala* is not the preferred grass type for making sitting mats although a set with patterns created using sweet paper were collected (Figs 038, 039, 040, and 041). The size of

¹⁴ Cadburys subsequently revealed that it tightened up its security from time to time in the late 90’s. Greg Stocks, GM Cadburys 2004, (pers comm. 24th Aug. 2004)

¹⁵ Personal observation Manzini Market, Ezulwini craft stalls, 1998

the mat is an indication of its function; furthermore, any form of embellishment does not qualify it to be a sleeping mat, and *Inchoboza*, *Indvuli*, or *Likhwane* is the preferred grass type for making sitting mats. The *Umtsala* grass type used for this set is fragile and not sturdy enough for the hardwearing purpose intended for a sitting mat. Margaret Thwala, who made this particular set of mats, had previously used dyes and her reason for using the sweet paper was as a time saving move, as mentioned previously; dyeing the grass was a lengthy process, so she had bought the sweet paper from women in Matsapha.¹⁶ Five of Thwala's mats, collected over a period of four weeks, show a gradual refinement in their general appearance, and are useful in demonstrating the early process of incorporation of additive materials. She began initially to create stepped rhombuses using the short widths of Family Favourite Chocolate Éclair. Figs. 037, 038, and 039 show clarity in the construction of the rhombuses but with inaccurate placing compared to the same geometric forms in Fig. 040. The sweet paper was loosely wrapped round the grass and frayed edges were apparent on an unused mat; the general appearance of Figs. 037, 038, and 039 lacks technical excellence, thus confirming the early stages of integration of additive materials.

During this period of active collecting for this research, a diverse sub-group began to emerge; these mats were either made from all grass or pure plastic. The way they were constructed differed from the mats made from strands of grass or strands of grass covered with sweet wrappers. The structure of these mats revealed either long strips of twisted plastic, plaited strips of plastic or plaited *Lutindzi*. This method of construction may be attributed to the fact that two of the mat makers came from the Highveld region of Swaziland. In some of these areas, only *Lutindzi* is available (see Chapter two). The long lengths of plaited *Lutindzi* were skilfully used to make floor mats or wall hangings. Fig. 010 depicts an early example of a wall hanging made from plaited *Lutindzi*; the patterning consists of small eyelets placed at regular

¹⁶ Margaret Thwala, Bhunya, (pers comm., Manzini Market, 12th Feb. 1998) Matsapha Industrial Site is the location of the Cadburys Sweet Factory.

intervals. It was constructed on the *Imbongolo* by laying the plait along the spine and then doubling the plait back to create the next row. These types of mats I have placed in a category termed the ‘Highveld Style.’ Jessie Ndsibandze bought the Chocolate Éclair rolls from a woman in Matsapha, plaited the ribbon in an identical way as she would plait the *Lutindzi*, and constructed the mat depicted in Fig. 009, a full sleeping mat size.¹⁷ Fig. 025, Fig. 031, Fig. 072 and Fig. 083 illustrate how plastic and *Lutindzi* can be used in an interchangeable fashion; both type of mats used either plaited plastic or plaited *Lutindzi*. In some areas of the highveld, neither *Inchoboza* nor *Lutindzi* is available; in Vusweni, Hereford, and the Piggs Peak area, mat maker Bikiwe Mamba has her supply of *Lutindzi* bought and transported by her grandchildren from the Lobamba area.¹⁸ She began to make floor mats from plaited *Lutindzi* (Figs. 072 and 082), as the surface obtained with this grass is too coarse to be used for sitting mats. These mats are further examples that support the isolation of a “Highveld Style.” Figs. 025 and Fig. 031 share all their technical characteristics with Fig. 072 and Fig. 083 but not the material; the *Lutindzi* has been replaced by plastic. The following examples, Fig. 007, Fig. 008, Fig. 081 and Fig. 082, were found to be consistent with the ‘Highveld Style’ in technique; however, the plastic had not been plaited but twisted. These mats shared other similarities such as the looped edges to prevent the mat from fraying (Figs. 081a and 083b). The overall appearance of this set of mats confirmed the work of experienced mat-makers who were fully conversant with the method of plaiting *Lutindzi* and employing that particular style and technique of mat-making.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jessie Ndsibandze (LaDube, Mpolonjeni) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14th Aug. 2002)

Mat commissioned for ‘*From eSwatini*’ Standard Bank Festival of the Arts, 1996. Commission coordinated in April 1996 by Richard Eyeington, National Coordinator SOS Children’s Villages, Swaziland.

¹⁸ Bikiwe Mamba, (LaNdwandwe) Vusweni, Herefords, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, (pers comm. 29th May 1999)

¹⁹ Recently, ‘Gone Rural’ has popularised products made from dyed *Lutindzi*, such as placemats and floor mats made from plaited *Lutindzi*, coiled and circular in shape. Colourful baskets showing geometrical forms are also made from dyed *Lutindzi*.

At the beginning of 1998, the makers of the wall hangings began to integrate a creamy coloured wax paper (initially noticed at the end of 1996 in Fig. 013).

This became the most popular type of paper to form the background of a large number of wall hangings that followed as in Figs. 042, 043, 044, 050, 051, 052, 055, 056, and 059. The paper was used conservatively; narrow strips were spirally bound round several strands of *Umtsala*.²⁰

Another distinctive development that contributed towards transforming the surface of the new composite mats was the introduction of geometrical motifs constructed within the confines of the limited space on the small rectangle of the wall hangings.

The rhombus became the most popular geometric shape created on the wall hangings. Initially a single motif was centrally placed (Figs. 013 and 014), the construction of this rhombus determined by its technical constraints. There was limited space on the wall hanging and a practical solution was to create oblique lines using short dashes of sweet paper in a step-like fashion. To construct such a rhombus takes four oblique lines; these are created from the top middle of the wall hanging moving downwards. From an initial short dash were placed two short steps on both sides; these steps moved down until two oblique lines were formed, rather like a splayed upside-down V. This shape was matched in the bottom half of the mat in order to complete the rhombus.

The mat-makers become more adventurous and experimental; the rhombus continued to be the most popularly used motif on the wall hangings and it is possible to follow the various stages of its development. The following mats help to plot its progression. Fig. 015 showed a distribution of two rhombuses on either side of a central horizontal line. Fig. 011 represented an anomaly within the general collection of mats; it was impossible to access additional information concerning this sample. It

²⁰ Greg Stocks, General Manager, and Shazikazi Mabuza, Human Resources Manager. Cadburys confirmed that this was not a paper used by Cadburys, but possibly from a sweet paper outlet in Durban. (Pers comm. 24th Aug. 2004)

is a highly decorated mat, made by hand, the size of a full-size sleeping mat using *Inchoboza*. Very thin strips of palm were used to construct the design.²¹ A series of solid rhombuses are connected by a line and placed along a central panel (Fig. 011a). The panel is supported on both sides by triangles that radiate towards the edge of the mat.²²

The method used to construct the popular rhombus motif has been carefully scrutinised; this helped to establish many possible variations. For a 'flat' rhombus, where the gap is shorter between the top 'A' and the bottom 'V' frame as in Figs. 013, 014, 015, 038, 044, 052, 057, 059, 086, and 095, the construction process remains the same, using short dashes in steps to create oblique lines. This method may also be applied to create the 'X' type cross motifs seen in Figs. 042, 043 and 065. Consequently, there was a brief transition period when the rhombus was created using stepped lines, and carefully planned to form a solid cross in its centre as in Figs. 050 and 051. The 'new' type of rhombus was developed further as shown by the patterns in Figs. 052, 086 and 095. Here the centre was formed into a solid rhombus with stepped edges. Fig. 058, as discussed in the section on dyes, is an example of a large grass mat with two large rhombuses. These were formed using short strips of dyed grass, overlaid onto the mat surface, and secured in place by the vertical threads. Both the outer lines and the solid core also formed the rhombus motifs. Other variations of forming the rhombus motif included an inner rhombus within an outer large rhombus, as in Figs. 037 and 039, or a horizontal dash placed in the centre for variety (Fig. 044). Stepped oblique lines could be equally transferred to create zigzag patterns as in Fig. 055.

The mat-makers continued to experiment with the rhombus motif adventurously, constructed using a variety of sweet papers attached to the surface of the mat in a

²¹ *Lusundvu (phoenix reclinata)*

²² The origin of this mat is unclear; to date no other examples of similar types have been found in Swaziland during the period of active collecting.

number of different ways. The stepped oblique lines became more upright making the rhombus motif taller. The rhombuses on Figs. 059, 062, 063, 064, 066, and 087 were created in relief on the surface of the wall hanging, the reason perhaps being that it was easier to place the small pieces of sweet paper on the surface and hold them down with the vertical threads than using the method of wrapping the sweet paper round the strands of grass. In Fig. 059, the relief parts were made to look like a series of actual-size imitation sweets as in Fig. 059a, while Figs. 062 and 063 demonstrate the use of whole widths of Cadburys Chocolate Éclair paper. The oblique lines were no longer formed using steps but made from strips of sweet paper attached to the surface of the mat and aligned with each other. Figs. 062, 063 and 064 reveal vertical threads spaced the same width apart as the space needed to fit the length of a real sweet (Figs. 063a and 064a). Figs. 066 and Fig. 087 depict joined rhombuses formed in relief to cover the whole surface of the wall hangings.

Towards the end of 1999, a distinctive set of wall hangings was collected that showed evidence of an exploratory use of geometrical shapes. The rhombus motif became more solid in structure and accurate in its construction. The ‘hidden moment of geometrical thinking’ (see Chapter six) was manifested in the wall hangings bought from Joyce Tsela and Thuli LaLukele, who were incidentally neighbours living in Mankayane. Figs. 099, 100, 101, 102, 103, 113, 114, 115, and 116 were made by Joyce Tsela; Figs. 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111 and 112 by Thuli LaLukele. This set of wall hangings constitutes a deviation from the much-used *Umtsala* to *Indvuli* grass type. Both mat makers bought the *Indvuli* in Mankayane and the sweet paper in Matsapha.

Both Joyce Tsela and Thuli LaLukele employed a time-consuming process: using short strips of sweet paper and coloured plastic spiral bound around selected areas of *Indvuli*, they constructed rhombuses in stepped oblique lines. The dashes used to form the steps were wide and almost block-like in appearance; solid rhombuses were made with three-stepped oblique lines. Similar combinations of oblique lines were

used to create zigzag patterns on either side of a centrally placed rhombus. Figs. 106 and 111 were made with wide dashes placed in a chequer-board fashion filling the surface area of the wall hangings. These particular sets of mats do not conform to the 'fast production' technique that has been associated with the construction of the new composite wall hangings. The mats represented a high level of technical excellence in the quality of their surface appearance and the pride of finish was evident in the type of edging used. As previously stated, chain stitching is time-consuming and not normally found on wall hangings; it is mostly applied by older and more experienced mat-makers. Both mat-makers have retained areas of exposed *Indvuli* and used sweet paper sparingly combined with an equal amount of coloured plastic from shopping bags; perhaps this was an indication the sweet paper was once again not plentiful. There were many similarities in the type of patterning and the way this was applied (Fig. 099 and Fig. 107, Fig. 103 and Fig. 109 and Fig. 104 and Fig. 113). They had influenced each other in their choice of design and construction of the wall hangings, thus making their collaborative approach apparent.

The introduction of words and writing on wall hangings began in the early part of 1999; initially the application was rudimentary and only nouns were used (Figs. 068, 069, 070, and 071). Fig. 068 was the first sample to be collected containing a religious message, 'JESUS.' The other examples included Fig 069, 'EMELO' (misspelled) indicating Ermelo, a name of a town in South Africa,²³ Fig 070, 'LESOTHO,' a country in southern Africa, and the word on Fig 071, 'LOVE.' The placing of the writing appeared awkward; if the mat was displayed using the loop fixed at the top vertical edge, then the writing would not be legible unless the mat was rotated 90 degrees. This embryonic stage of attempts to create words on the wall hangings became a pre-cursor to the sophisticated writing that subsequently emerged.

²³ One needs to know the context: in many instances, the makers cannot read or write, and have asked someone else to write down a word or letters for them to copy onto a mat. Education is by no means universal in Swaziland; for some people and particularly women living in remote areas their experiences of the world beyond their homes come largely from the radio and their visits to the chief's kraal for the monthly meetings. (Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17th Aug. 2000))

Towards the end of 1999, a combination of numbers with geometric shapes appeared for the first time; the rhombus motif was repeated and the wall hanging became a type of a calendar that announced the coming New Year and the millennium. Fig. 119 shows '2000' enclosed by two rhombuses. The following year the wall hanging declared the 'Year 2001' with a centrally placed rhombus (Fig. 132). Other developments occurred towards Christmas; the rhombus motif had transformed and was produced as an object, a hanging 'star' in bright red shiny sweet paper. It was first made into a rectangle and the outline carefully cut in steps to make the rhombus shape (Fig. 133). Words also began to appear on the 'star,' in particular on a 'double star' where religious messages were placed as shown in Figs. 162 and 174. A combination of the rhombus and other rudimentary constructed shapes, such as a 'V' and an upside down 'V,' continued to be used and appeared on wall hangings that also incorporated religious messages (Figs. 152, 154, 157, 160, 166, 168, 187, 188, 200 and 204).

Several lucrative options were available for the marketing of these composite wall hangings; these included the craft stalls outside the Sun International group of hotels in the Ezulwini Valley, as well as the regional markets. Examples had been noted in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.²⁴ The traders and middle women had discovered and realised the commercial value of contemporary Swazi 'plastic' mats with religious messages. The patronage for these wall hangings came mainly from Swazi traders, mostly women who made up the middle sector and bought from Manzini Market to sell at roadside stalls and at the Mbabane Market. All these places attracted tourists; busloads of international tourists continue to be transported by the Sun International Hotels to make souvenir hunting accessible for their clients. The small wall hangings are portable, may be rolled up, and most importantly are affordable, even at the 400 per cent marked-up price adopted by the stallholders. (A

²⁴ Personal observations: craft shop in Long St. Cape town April 1999, Rosebank Fleamarket, Johannesburg 1999, and Onoyi Mngometulu who sells to traders from KZN, (pers comm. April 1999)

small wall hanging costs five *Emalangeni* at the Manzini Market and up to 40 *Emalangeni* elsewhere.) The actual customers, the people who would hang such a mat in their homes, comprise both tourists and Swazis; in particular demand by Swazis are the wall hangings containing religious messages. This is partly due to nearly 50 percent of Swazis following Christian Zionism and belonging to the 'The Swazi Christian Church of Zion of South Africa', (Booth 2000). Set against this Zionist background of the Swazis, towards the middle of 2000 the market began to be flooded with an abundance of wall hangings with religious and personal messages. The bright, bold, and colourful appearance of the wall hangings was compatible with the equally colourful Zionist dress and ceremonies. The dominant additional material used for the wall hangings became the creamy wax paper and, in many examples, it formed the background for the placement of the writing.

The total surface area of a wall hanging offers limited space; the average dimensions of a wall hanging are 88 cm in length and 50 cm in width.²⁵ Within the confines of this limitation, many mat makers faced the challenging task of making attractive wall hangings both as marketable commodities and an aesthetic act. The space available for decoration could comfortably accommodate the use of three words and perhaps up to five words in total. Horizontal bands in different colours became a popular choice for decorating the rest of the wall hanging. The bands consisted of spiral bound strands of *Umtsala*; this remained a conservative way of using the sweet paper and the formation of wide horizontal bands proved a timesaving move by the mat-makers as the formation of the letters had become a time-consuming process. Short strips of sweet paper secured by vertical thread were used to form each letter and this involved a considerable amount of advanced planning (Fig. 154a).

The religious messages that consisted of up to three words were organised in many different variations and included the following: JESUS LOVES YOU (Fig. 125), HE

²⁵ Incidentally, this measurement also corresponds closely to the Renaissance Golden Rectangle, (80 cm X 50 cm)

IS GOD (Fig. 136), I LOVE JESUS (Fig. 137), GOD IS GOOD (Fig. 138), GLORY TO JESUS (Fig. 139), I SEE GOD (Fig. 140), GOD LOVES YOU (Fig. 141), GOD IS LOVE (Fig. 142), OH MY GOD (Fig. 143), SON OF GOD (Fig. 154), I LOVE JESUS (Fig. 157), PRAYS GOD (Fig. 160), JESUS IS ALIVE (Fig. 161), MY GOD (Fig. 163) PRAYS THE LORD (Fig. 170), TRUST IN GOD (Fig. 171), I LOVE JESUS (Fig. 172), GOD BLESS YOU (Fig. 187), LORD JESUS (Fig. 188), GOD IS LOVE (Fig. 189), I LOVE GOD (Fig. 196), POWER OF GOD (Fig. 198), JESUS IS COMING (Fig. 199).

By the middle of 2002, the messages had become lengthy and displayed sentiments similar to the Victorian cross-stitch embroidered samplers with homilies. The following wall hangings indicate they could suitably be displayed on walls in homes or in church offices – HOME SWEET HOME (Fig. 208), GOD BLESS MY HOME (Fig. 164), GOD BLESS MY FAMILY (Fig. 169), WE ARE FAMILY OF GOD (Fig. 200) and JESUS IS MY SAVIOR (Fig. 197). An early example collected with SYN OF GOD (Fig. 168) is later found in a refined form and correctly spelled SON OF GOD (Fig. 193).²⁶ The inclusion of other motifs such as the rhombus became less frequent; perhaps the time-consuming formation of the letters prevented the creation of additional motifs. The following three examples were exceptions, where a partially formed rhombus or an unidentifiable motif with oblique lines enclosed the word(s): AFRICA (Fig. 165), GOD (Fig. 166), I LOVE ANGOLA (Fig. 167).²⁷ The popularity of the wall hangings with religious messages encouraged Sithembile Mayiesela, who used to make plastic baskets, to switch to wall hangings; she found that the wall hangings had a far more lucrative market appeal than the baskets.²⁸

The inclusion of personal messages on the following wall hangings posed a question about the purpose of the mat's message. Was it intended primarily as a

²⁶ There is a high rate of disparity between the literacy rates amongst Swazi women.

²⁷ A trader who travels to Angola but who had not collected the order commissioned Mamsi Maziya, Moyeni, (pers comm., Manzini Market 16th May 2002)

²⁸ Sithembile Mayiesela, Elwandle, (pers comm., Manzini Market, 9th Aug. 2001)

communication between the maker and buyer or the buyer and a third person? The following sentiments were depicted: LOVE ME (Fig. 117), I LOVE YOU (Fig. 126), JOY (Fig. 152), I LOVE SWEETY (Fig. 173), LOVE (Fig. 183), YES (Fig. 184), LOOK HAPPY (Fig. 185), COME TO MY ROOM SWEETY (Fig. 201) and I LOVE YOU SWEETY (Fig. 209). Elisabeth Linnebuhr (2003), in relation to Swahili cloth, makes the following connection: there is a tradition amongst East African women that involves the wearing of a certain type of cloth when they want to extend an invitation to a man to spend a night with them.²⁹ Everyone understands this type of social code of conduct in that society; the messages on the wall hangings in Swaziland could perhaps be used to serve a similar purpose.³⁰ Similarly, amongst the Karanga in Zimbabwe, clay pots are used to communicate the relationship between a husband and wife. The attitude of a husband towards a wife is expressed by the way he handles a pot, as a husband can insult a wife by mishandling or handling a pot roughly. A wife can, in turn, refuse his conjugal right by turning a ceramic pot upside down (Aschwanden:1982). This link between pots and people indicates that non-verbal communication takes places through ceramics to mediate human relationships.³¹

Figs. 176 and 177 show two words, 'HIV AIDS,' and were bought at a time when the organisation National Emergency Response Council on HIV/AIDS (NERCHA) was being set up.³² Throughout the country, billboards prominently display HIV and AIDS information concerning counselling centres, AIDS testing centres and prevention posters. The red AIDS awareness ribbon has been depicted on many public information posters but not yet on wall hangings; however, examples of its inclusion on small pins and on *Emagcebesha* (Swazi beaded necklaces) have been collected from the Manzini Market and an elaborately decorated beer pot with a

²⁹ Linnebuhr, Elisabeth, Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (pers comm. July 2004 Swaziland)

³⁰ The mat makers were not very forthcoming with additional information concerning these messages.

³¹ Hall, S. 1998: 251-252

³² In June 2002, the Swazi Government decided to declare the HIV and AIDS pandemic a national crisis. The Figures for people living with HIV and AIDS rose to 40% of the total population of a million. (45% by January 2005 - UNAIDS, Swaziland.)

ribbon made in relief was collected in southern Swaziland. ³³

The apparent transition of patronage from tourists to Swazis became evident in the following wall hangings as the following messages appeared in *SiSwati*, HALALA NGO JESU (Stay with Jesus) (Fig. 175), HLALA NAMI (Stay with me) (Fig. 186), WOTA KU JESU (Come to Jesus) (Fig. 190), and LIYASI WA LIYAM ILA (The more we cut the more it grows) (Fig. 207). This latter message has a reference to grass cutting. The transition of the written language from English to *SiSwati* meant the mat makers had realised their mats had a Swazi appeal. These samples were only available occasionally; the ones in English tended to dominate and continue to do so today.

Towards the middle of 2003, wall hangings began to deviate from the religious messages and were sold side by side with names of the top South African soccer teams and its players such as I LOVE KAIZER CHIEFS (Fig. 194), JOMO COSMOS (Fig. 203) and BAFANA BAFANA (Fig. 204). The appeal of this was to capture the attention of the increasing number of South African tourists visiting Swaziland and to sell to the many traders from Johannesburg who frequented the Manzini Market; indeed, that was their main purpose. ³⁴

The most recent changes recorded reveal contemporary developments in Swazi society. Depicted in Fig. 195 are the letters I C U; SMS language on wall hangings had arrived in Swaziland; the advantage being, the construction of the abbreviated words became easier to place on the wall hangings.

The most sophisticated decorated wall hanging includes the depiction of a Swazi shield (Fig. 206). This nationalistic approach had been previously noted on Fig. 096

³³ Beer pot collected in Lavumisa, southern Swaziland, Jan. 2002.

³⁴ Darron Raw, Raw Africa, Destination Management, Swaziland, (email interview, 5th Jan. 2004)

that included SD (Swaziland); this has long been used on the beaded necklaces *Emagcebesha*.

The current mat production is aimed generally at an internal market as demonstrated by the availability of religious messages written both in English and *SiSwati*. The potential for innovations in future mat-making remains a challenge for the mat-makers in fashioning wall hangings with new types of messages; perhaps this will take the form of messages pertaining to living a safe lifestyle and a response to the current HIV and AIDS pandemic in Swaziland. The new wall hangings might possibly include for example, 'STOP HIV' or 'LOVE LIFE'.